

THE LINCOLN-CONKLING CORRESPONDENCE

BY

PAUL SELBY

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE
TRANSACTIONS

OF THE

Illinois State Historical Society

FOR THE YEAR, 1908



SPRINGFIELD, ILL.
ILLINOIS STATE JOURNAL CO., STATE PRINTERS

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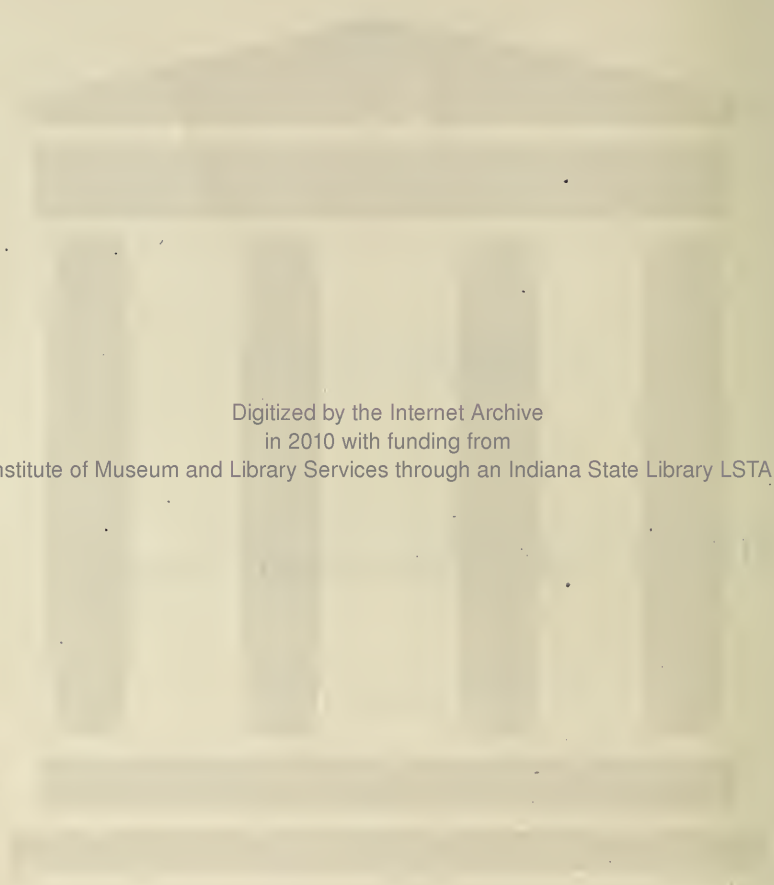
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THE LINCOLN-CONKLING LETTER.

READ BEFORE A UNION MASS-MEETING AT SPRINGFIELD, ILL., SEPT. 3,
1863—AN EXPLANATION OF LINCOLN'S MOST FAMOUS EPISTLE.¹

By Paul Selby.

Following is the title of the article as it appeared in the Chicago Tribune, Sunday, June 23, 1895:

LIGHT ON A FAMOUS LINCOLN LETTER.

What the Martyr President Really Meant in His Epistle to James C. Conkling.

Popular opinion has been practically unanimous, for the last thirty years, in the sentiment that the most noteworthy speech of an unofficial character ever uttered by Abraham Lincoln, was delivered by him in the old Representatives Hall of the Illinois State Capitol at Springfield, June 16, 1858, when, in response to the resolution of the Republican State convention declaring him the choice of his party for United States Senator, he announced the doctrine of a "house divided against itself" as applied to the institution of slavery. While his two inaugurals were accorded a greater importance and commanded a more profound attention, both at home and abroad, by virtue of their official character and their appearance during a great national crisis, and his brief speech at Gettysburg took rank beside the noblest specimens of Athenian eloquence belonging to the age of Pericles and Demosthenes, because of the simplicity of its diction and the touching pathos which went directly to the heart of a nation already bowed at the bier of its patriotic dead, the Springfield speech startled the country with the first clear-cut and incisive statement of the issue opening up before it, and foreshadowing the result which was to follow the coming struggle. It thus assumed at once the character of admonition and prophecy, and furnished the keynote to the remarkable forensic contest of the same year between its author and his brilliant rival, Stephen A. Douglas. It ante-dated the "irrepressible conflict" of Seward and indicated more clearly what might be expected as the outcome.

Among the letters of Mr. Lincoln on public topics there is one which is likely to be regarded, as time advances, as most unique and characteristic of the man and displaying the peculiar subtlety of his intellect in a most striking manner. Reference is had here to what is known as the "Lincoln-

¹ The original article, of which the one herewith presented is a copy, was published in the Sunday edition of the Chicago Tribune June 23, 1895, accompanied by a portrait of President Lincoln and an editorial endorsement which will be found quoted on a following page. To the original text as it appears in this issue, have been added some facts relating to the event of which it treats—some of them being incorporated in the body of the article and others added as foot notes.

Conkling letter," written by Mr. Lincoln on the 26th of August, 1863, to be read before a State mass-meeting of "unconditional Union men," held at Springfield, Ill., Sept. 3 of that year. Some of its expressions border so closely on the enigmatic as to have given rise to some controversy as to its proper construction, when read with different predilections and degrees of care.

This is more remarkable in view of the fact that Mr. Lincoln is one of the most lucid, as well as logical, of writers on any subject on which he chooses to express himself with clearness and accuracy. That this difference of construction is due to careless reading is, I think, capable of demonstration from the context of the letter itself, as well as from the circumstances which called it out and the relation of its writer to the man through whom it was addressed to the public.

This letter was written at a critical period in the history of the war. The final proclamation of emancipation had been before the country for a period of eight months, and had, during that time, been the object of persistent attack from the opponents of the administration.

Although Vicksburg had fallen and the bloody battle of Gettysburg had been won during the last few months, the government was in serious financial straits, the drafts had been forcibly resisted in some of the states, and the enemies of the Union cause in the North were more than usually active and defiant, as shown by the "peace meetings" held at various points, especially at Springfield on the 17th of June previous.¹ The elections of the previous year had resulted disastrously to the administration, and many of its most earnest supporters were becoming disheartened, as they saw the fate of the republic trembling in the balance. It was in this condition of affairs that Mr. Lincoln's personal and political friends, at his old home, conceived the idea of calling a "grand mass-meeting of the unconditional Union men of the State, without regard to former party associations, who are in favor of a vigorous prosecution of the war," the object being to counteract the effect of the peace meetings already referred to, and sustain the hands of the government in its efforts to subdue the rebellion.

The interest taken in the meeting, as well as its State character, is shown by the fact that the call received the signatures of several hundred citizens, including representatives of two-thirds of the counties of the State, and in order to make the occasion the more impressive, President Lincoln was invited to be present,² besides a score or more of the most distinguished orators of the Nation.²

¹ At the Springfield meeting, held under the leadership of Gen. J. W. Singleton, a series of twenty-four resolutions was adopted, of which the twenty-third aroused special criticism on the part of the supporters of the government war policy. This, among other things, declared that "a further offensive prosecution of this war tends to subvert the Constitution and entails upon this nation all the disastrous consequences of misrule and anarchy," and proposed that there be held "a national convention to settle upon terms of peace, which should have in view the restoration of the Union as it was, and the securing, by constitutional amendment, of such rights of the several states and people thereof, as honor and justice" (in the estimation of its advocates) "demand." As this was after the issue of the Emancipation Proclamation of Jan. 1, 1863, it amounted practically to a proposition to rescind that measure and re-establish slavery under conditions that would perpetuate its existence for an indefinite period. In the light of this feature, it is not difficult to understand to what class Lincoln meant to apply his argument while addressing a meeting of "unconditional Union men."

² The list of signatures to the call, as published in the Illinois State Journal at the time, occupied one and a quarter columns of the paper in solid agate type, containing the names of citizens of sixty-six out of one hundred and two counties of the State, and ranging from one to fifty-five names from each county. Pike county taking the lead with the larger number and being followed by Grundy county with fifty-three signers, Morgan with fifty-one, McLean with forty-five, DeKalb with fifty-three and Sangamon with forty-one—making a total of 1,000 to 1,200 names for the whole State and indicating the wide interest in the meeting. The call requested that all loyal men rally together from the remotest parts of the State; "from the farm and the workshop, the office and the counting-room;" that "the farmer leave his plow, the mechanic his tools, the merchant his store, the professional man his business, and devote a few hours to the interests of his country and the demands of the government." That it was answered in the spirit in which it was expressed, is shown by the fact that, in spite of the absence of 150,000 of

We have the assurances of Mr. Lincoln's biographers, Messrs. Nicolay and Hay—who, as his private secretaries at the time, must have been aware of his purposes and desires—that for a time he “cherished the hope of going to Springfield, and once more in his life renew the sensation, so dear to politicians, of personal contact with great and enthusiastic masses,” but that he was compelled to forego this pleasure in consequence of the demands of public business. Instead he sent a letter addressed to the Hon. James C. Conkling, of Springfield (who, as Chairman of the Committee of Arrangements, had written the letter of invitation), which letter he requested Mr. Conkling to read to the assembled thousands who would compose the meeting.¹ It is to be presumed that, understanding thoroughly the existing emergency in the Nation and the momentous character of the occasion when this

the stalwart citizens of the State in the field struggling for the perpetuity of the Union, citizens came from a distance of fifty to sixty miles from Springfield on horseback or in wagons, many bringing their wives and children with them, while many single individuals came from the remotest parts of the State or from other states. The streets were crowded, and in the absence of hotel or other accommodations, many were compelled to sleep in their wagons or on the streets—the crowd being confessedly the largest that, up to that time, had ever assembled in the State on any public occasion, and being estimated by opponents of the movement as high as 40,000, and by its friends from 60,000 to 75,000, and by some even higher.

The meeting was held in what is now the western part of the city of Springfield, on the ground on which the first State fairs were held, but which, during the first year, of the war, was a recruiting camp and drilling field under the name of “Camp Yates.” An imposing procession marched through the principal streets and to the ground under the direction of Col. John Williams as chief marshal, and speeches were delivered from half a dozen different stands with a presiding officer at each—among these being Hon. S. M. Cullom, Col. John Dougherty, Hon. S. W. Moulton and Judge Mark Bangs, the fifth stand being occupied entirely by German speakers. After the firing of a national salute, the first business was the reading of President Lincoln's letter from each stand, followed by letters and telegrams from those who had been unable to accept invitations to be present and participate in the proceedings. These included responses from Edward Everett of Massachusetts, Senator Dickinson of New York, Governor Blair of Michigan, Schuyler Colfax of Indiana, Congressman Bingham of Ohio, General Benj. F. Butler, and General John A. Logan and Owen Lovejoy of Illinois, both of whom were prevented from being present on account of illness. Speeches were delivered from the various stands by Senators Chandler of Michigan and Doolittle of Wisconsin, Henry S. Lane of Indiana, Governor Yates, General R. J. Oglesby, General Isham N. Haynie, General John A. McClelland, General B. M. Prentiss, Colonel John Dougherty, Congressman E. C. Ingersoll, Hon. Isaac N. Arnold and many other home speakers. The principal speakers at the German stand were Hon. Casper Butz of Chicago, H. Goedeking of Belleville, and Emil Pretorius of St. Louis. This, however, does not exhaust the list of orators who stirred the hearts of their hearers by their patriotic eloquence, appealing for the preservation of the Union without regard to party. A stirring meeting was also held in the evening in the public square in front of the court house.

¹ The correspondence with Mr. Lincoln by telegraph and otherwise, while he was considering the possibility of visiting Springfield in compliance with the invitation to be present at the Union mass meeting, and the final announcement of his intention to send a letter instead, includes the following, the first being a message by telegraph written on a blank of the old “Illinois and Mississippi Company—Caton Lines” (the predecessor of the “Western Union”), of which the late Colonel J. J. S. Wilson was superintendent, with headquarters at Springfield, and which is carefully preserved with the other papers:

“SPRINGFIELD, ILL., Aug. 20, 1863.—(By telegraph from Washington, 10:30 a. m., Aug. 20, 1863.)—The Hon. James C. Conkling: Your letter of the 14th is received. I think I will go or send a letter—probably the latter.

“A. LINCOLN. President.”

On the lower left-hand corner of the message appears the following note from the operator, which may serve to indicate the means then thought advisable to keep the plans and movements of the President from becoming matter of public notoriety:

“Mr. C.—Mr. Wilson got this in cypher.

OPERATOR.”

A few days before the date of the meeting, Mr. Conkling received the following letter from Mr. Lincoln, written on a War Department letterhead, and enclosing his letter designed to be read at the meeting:

“WAR DEPARTMENT, WASHINGTON CITY, D. C., Aug. 27, 1863.—My Dear Conkling: I cannot leave here now. Herewith is a letter instead. I have but one suggestion—I read it very slowly. And now, God bless you and all good Union men.

“Yours as ever,

“[Private.]”

“A. LINCOLN.”

On the bottom of this letter Mr. Conkling added the following memorandum: “The above letter was sent with the letter published in Holland's ‘Life of Lincoln,’ on page (420-21), and which was intended to be read at the Republican convention held at Springfield, September (3), 1863, and which was read at that time.

“JAMES C. CONKLING.”

letter was to be made public, he threw into it all the power of persuasion and logical argument, of which he was so capable a master. Some of the passages in it, upon which have hinged the differences of construction alluded to in the opening part of this article, are as follows:

"You desire peace, and you blame me that we do not have it."

"You are dissatisfied with me about the negro. Quite likely there is a difference of opinion between you and myself upon that subject."

"You dislike the emancipation proclamation and perhaps would have it retracted. You say it is unconstitutional. . . . Some of you profess to think its retraction would operate favorably for the Union."

"You say you will not fight to free negroes. Some of them seem willing to fight for you; but no matter. Fight you, then, exclusively to save the Union."

It has been claimed—not generally, it is true, but in a few instances—that these passages were addressed primarily and mainly to the active promoters (Mr. Conkling and his associates) of this meeting of unconditional "Union men," called for the avowed and express purpose of sustaining the hands of the government in its struggle for the preservation of the Union, and that such extracts as these prove that Mr. Lincoln regarded these men as, in some way, hostile to his war policy and meant to rebuke them for their position, while using them as a medium to reach the Nation. That so distinguished an author as George Bancroft erred on this point is shown by the fact that, in his eloquent and inspiring address delivered before a joint session of the two Houses of Congress on February 12, 1866, in celebration of the first anniversary of Lincoln's birth after the date of his assassination, in introducing some extracts from the Lincoln-Conkling letter, he said: "He (Lincoln) wrote in reply to another caviler¹—implying that Mr. Conkling, to whom the letter was addressed, was a "caviler," or unfair critic of Lincoln's policy. That he had found reason to change his opinion on this subject is shown by the modification of his language when this address appeared a few months later in book form, then saying, "He (Lincoln) wrote in reply to other cavils"²—indicating that the brilliant author had then learned that Lincoln's reply to his critics was not intended as a rebuke to Mr. Conkling and his associates connected with the Union mass meeting of September 3, 1863, but to his own enemies who were clamoring for "peace at any price" without regard to the preservation of the Union.

Indeed, it has been charged that there was a conspiracy among leading Republican politicians of Illinois, including those intimately connected with the State administration at that time, "to remove Mr. Lincoln by fair means or foul from his exalted position as leader of the political and military forces of the country and replace him with one of its own creatures," of which this meeting constituted a part; and it has been claimed that Mr. Lincoln used the occasion successfully to circumvent these schemes of his enemies within his own party.

To state such a proposition as to Mr. Lincoln and his most intimate and trusted personal and political friends, is to disprove it. Among the score or more of authors who, attracted by Mr. Lincoln's great name and illustrious career, have attempted to write his biography—all of whom, with a few unimportant exceptions, quote this remarkable letter and recognize the wonderful sweep and power of its argument—I have met with only one who takes the view of its purpose here controverted. This author goes to the point of speaking of the promoters of this meeting as "posing for the moment as unconditional Union men," and charges them with sending Mr. Lincoln "a written invitation to be present and hear himself discussed."

In order to give the color of plausibility to the construction of Mr. Lincoln's letter for which these writers contend, they are compelled not only to disregard the well-known character of Mr. Lincoln's friends in his own

¹ "Congressional Globe" (1866), First session Thirty-ninth Congress (p. 804).

² "Memorial Address on the Life and Character of Abraham Lincoln" (in book form, p. 39).

State, who had steadily adhered to his political fortunes a quarter of a century, but to ignore the opening paragraphs of the letter itself, which furnish the keynote of its spirit and meaning as a whole. The letter is addressed to the Hon. James C. Conkling, one of Mr. Lincoln's most intimate personal and political friends, who had been a member of the Republican State Central committee and candidate for Presidential Elector for Mr. Lincoln's own district in 1860, as he was again for the same position in 1864. These facts indicate clearly the relations existing between him and the President. As already stated, he was Chairman of the Committee of Arrangements for the Springfield meeting, and in this capacity had written the letter inviting Mr. Lincoln to be present. In this letter, as quoted by Messrs. Nicolay and Hay in their *Life of Lincoln*, Mr. Conkling, in urging Mr. Lincoln's acceptance, had said:

"There is a bad element in this State as well as in others, and every public demonstration in favor of law and order and constitutional government will have a favorable influence. The importance of our meeting, therefore, at the capital of a State which has sent so many soldiers into the army and which exercises such a controlling power in the West cannot be overestimated."

Mr. Lincoln's reply was not only addressed to Mr. Conkling, but was accompanied with a request that he should read it to the approaching mass-meeting. In the opening paragraphs, after expressing the satisfaction it would give him to meet his "old friends" at his "own home," which he is precluded from doing by the exigencies of the public business, and after recognizing the character of the proposed meeting in the fact that it was "to be composed of all those who maintain unconditional devotion to the Union," to whom he tenders "the Nation's gratitude," as he does to those "other noble men whom no partisan malice or partisan hope can make false to the Nation's life," he says: "There are those who are dissatisfied with me. To such I would say."

Then follows that marvelous argument in proof that the only hope of peace with preservation of the Union is to suppress the rebellion by force of arms—in defense of the emancipation proclamation, the employment of negroes as soldiers, and of the war policy of the administration in general, closing with an encouraging enumeration of the signs of final triumph and an appeal to the patriotism of all—that stirred the hearts of Union men throughout the Nation. How absurd to say of the argument in defense of the emancipation proclamation that it was intended for those who, if they differed with Mr. Lincoln at all on this question, did so because it was not issued as early as they desired. And so of the rest.

It is evident that Mr. Lincoln had in mind, first of all, the objectors to his policy who were obstructing the measures taken for the preservation of the Union, and meant, after answering them, to arouse all alike to the duty of preserving the Nation's life. And that it had the desired effect is shown in the response it evoked wherever the national flag gave protection to complete freedom of opinion.¹

But this construction of Mr. Lincoln's intention in penning this memorable letter is not dependent upon the opinion of any single latter-day reader. The Hon. James C. Conkling, who received it and by special request of Mr. Lin-

¹ Other examples of Lincoln's peculiar style of argument, aiming at his opponents while addressing his friends, might be cited, one of the most noticeable being in a speech delivered by him at Galena during the Fremont campaign in 1856, a "fragment" of which is preserved in the Nicolay and Hay edition of the Lincoln "Addresses and Letters," (Vol. I, pp. 220-221). In this he says:

"We, the majority, would not strive to destroy the Union; and if any attempt is made, it must be you, who so loudly stigmatize us as disunionists. But the Union in any event will not be dissolved. We don't want to dissolve it, and if you attempt it, we won't let you. . . . All this talk about the dissolution of the Union is humbug—nothing but folly. We don't want to dissolve the Union; you shall not."

The same sentiments, and almost the same language—whether accurately or not—are used in the Whitney report of the "Lost Speech," as delivered at Bloomington on May 29, 1856.

coln, read it at the meeting of September, 1863, and who still lives¹ at his old home and that of his friend, the martyred President, should of all living men be best qualified to state what was the true meaning of its author. In a letter to the writer of this article during the present year, with the original of Mr. Lincoln's letter lying before him, Mr. Conkling wrote as follows:

"SPRINGFIELD, ILL., March 16, 1895.

Paul Selby, Esq.:

MY DEAR SIR—Your esteemed favor of the 15th inst., is received. There seems to be some misunderstanding as to the meaning and intent of a portion of President Lincoln's letter to me dated August 26, 1863. I have the original letter now in my desk before me.

"A charge is now made that, although the letter was addressed to those who promoted or composed the mass-meeting, yet some of its leaders were conspirators against Mr. Lincoln and opposed his aspirations for the Presidency a second time, and that they assumed the title of unconditional Union men when, in fact, they were dissatisfied and criticised the policy of the administration. This charge is perfectly absurd. The Executive Committee and leaders of the movement would not stultify themselves by assuming a name to which they were not entitled. At that period the great mass of the Republican party were terribly in earnest. They needed no concealment of their plans and purposes. Our armies had recently achieved glorious victories. Vicksburg had fallen and the battle of Gettysburg had been won. The emancipation proclamation had been issued and the rebellion was being crushed. The rifle was placed in the hands of the ex-slave and he became an efficient part of our armies and bravely fought for the preservation of the Union and his own liberty. This was one of the grandest measures of the administration and Mr. Lincoln naturally felt solicitous for its complete success. After acknowledging the receipt of the invitation to attend the mass-meeting of unconditional Union men on the 3d of September, 1863, he immediately commences an argument, not with the unconditional Union men, but with others who criticised his policy and attempted to defeat his plans. He rebuked those who were for peace at any price and denounced those who proclaimed their treasonable utterances so boldly at that period and claimed the war to be a failure. Mr. Lincoln's letter opens as follows:

"The Hon. James C. Conkling—My Dear Sir: Your letter inviting me to attend a mass-meeting of unconditional Union men to be held at the capital of Illinois on the third day of September has been received. It would be very agreeable to me to there meet my old friends at my own home, but I cannot just now be absent from here so long as a visit there would require.

"The meeting is to be of all those who maintain unconditional devotion to the Union, and I am sure my old political friends will thank me for tendering, as I do, the national gratitude to those other noble men whom no partisan malice or partisan hope can make false to the Nation's life.'

"From this it can be seen that Mr. Lincoln knew he was invited to address men who preferred the preservation of the Union to every other consideration. They had no criticisms to make upon his policy. They submitted to his superior wisdom and judgment. They were gratified with his success and were willing to trust him for the future. There was no necessity for arguing with such men. They were already convinced that Mr. Lincoln was right, and they were willing to adopt his policy unconditionally and without any objection.

"But Mr. Lincoln proceeds: 'There are those who are dissatisfied with me. To such I would say, you desire peace and you blame me that we do not have it.'

"But these persons did not belong to said convention. They had no sympathy with it. They wanted peace at any price. They preferred the dissolution of the Union to the abolition of slavery. They gave aid and com-

¹ Mr. Conkling died in his home at Springfield, March 1, 1899.

fort to the enemy. They strove to make the rebellion triumphant over the Union. Yet Mr. Lincoln reasoned with them fairly and honestly and endeavored to convince them of their errors and their folly.

"The argument was made for their benefit, although the letter was read to a mass-meeting of unconditional Union men. Yours truly,

JAMES C. CONKLING."

Testimony like this, coming from the man to whom this historical paper was addressed and who knew the spirit and motives of the men whom he had represented in penning the invitation which called it forth; who had been the close political ally and personal friend of Mr. Lincoln through his whole public career, and was familiar with all his modes of thought and action, and who twice cast the vote for Lincoln's own district in the Electoral College of Illinois for his friend, should be conclusive on this purpose. It would be the height of absurdity to charge Mr. Lincoln, even by implication, with using an occasion of such transcendent importance to the Union cause, when the fate of the Nation was at stake, to promote the chances of his renomination for the Presidency one year later, and with offering a scarcely veiled insult to his "old friends" in his "own home," by asking one of them to read a paper intended to be a rebuke and a reproach of the reader and his associates. Abraham Lincoln was neither a political trickster seeking his own advancement by the arts of the demagogue, nor was he an ungrateful friend seeking to humiliate his most earnest supporters.

If any further evidence were needed on this point, it is furnished in the closing sentence of the private letter (quoted in a footnote on a preceding page of this paper), in which he enclosed the letter to be read at the Union mass-meeting. In that letter, speaking with an earnestness and emphasis that seemed almost impassioned, he said: 'God bless you and all good Union men.'

That the importance of this letter has not been overestimated is capable of demonstration from contemporaneous and subsequent tributes to it. Messrs. Nicolay and Hay, in their "Life of Lincoln," say of it:

"Among all the state papers of Mr. Lincoln from his nomination to his death this letter is unique. It may be called his last stump speech; the only one made during his Presidency. We find in it all the qualities that made him in Illinois the incomparable political leader of his party for a generation. There is the same close, unerring logic, the same innate perception of political conduct, the same wit and sarcasm, the same touch of picturesque eloquence, which abounded in his earlier and more careless oratory, but all wonderfully heightened, strengthened, and chastened by a sense of weighty responsibility. . . . It was, like most of his speeches, addressed mostly to his opponents, and in this short space he appealed successively to their reason, to their sympathies, and to their fears. . . . The style . . . is as remarkable as its matter; each sentence, like a trained athlete, is divested of every superfluous word and syllable, yet nowhere is there a word lacking any more than a word too much."

It met instant approval alike from the ablest politicians, statesmen, and rhetoricians. Charles Sumner wrote, indorsing it as "a noble letter," "a historical document," and declared "it cannot be answered." Henry Wilson spoke of it as "noble, patriotic, and Christian," and predicted that it would be "on the lips and in the hearts of hundreds and thousands this day." The venerable and scholarly Josiah Quincy pronounced it "happy, timely, conclusive, and effective," and declared, in view of the assaults made upon Mr. Lincoln's character, "the development is an imperishable monument of wisdom and virtue."¹

¹ Nicolay and Hay's "Abraham Lincoln—A History" (pp. 379-385).

It is due, not alone to Mr. Lincoln's personal and political friends in his own State, who, whatever might have been their differences on minor details of policy, always stood true in support of his great measures, but to the memory of Mr. Lincoln himself, that this now famous letter should be understood as its sagacious and illustrious author intended.

PAUL SELBY.

TRIBUNE COMMENT.

The original communication of which the preceding article is a copy, with some added facts in foot-notes, was published in the Chicago Tribune of June 23, 1895, under the title, "Light on a Famous Lincoln Letter—What the Martyr President Really Meant in his Epistle to James C. Conkling." On the editorial page of the same issue appeared the following paragraph from the pen of the late Joseph Medill, then editor-in-chief of the paper:

"THE TRIBUNE prints on another page of today's paper, the notable or "unique" letter written by Abraham Lincoln to James C. Conkling, of Springfield, in 1863, and read at the mass-meeting of Union men held at the State capital September 3 of that year. This is accompanied by a communication from Paul Selby, in which he controverts successfully the claim which has been made sometimes that some of the passages of Mr. Lincoln's letter were addressed primarily to some of the promoters of the mass-meeting in question, who, it has been alleged, were unfriendly to Mr. Lincoln and were conspiring against him. Mr. Selby shows that the passages of the letter on which this claim has been based—such as "You desire peace, and you blame me that we do not have it," or, "You dislike the emancipation proclamation, and perhaps would have it retracted"—were not intended for the benefit of the Union men who called, or who attended, the mass-meeting, but were addressed to a very different constituency—that is, to those who were openly and avowedly opposed to his policy. The letter was a stump speech of remarkable ability, and which had a wonderful effect. It is worth reading as an admirable example of Mr. Lincoln's political sagacity, his logical and argumentative powers, and his terse, forcible English."

BRIEF SKETCH OF MR. CONKLING.

James Cook Conkling was born in New York City, Oct. 13, 1816; graduated from Princeton College, New Jersey, in 1835; studied law and was admitted to the bar at Morristown, New Jersey, in 1838, when he removed to Springfield, Ill., and had for his first partner in the practice of his profession Cyrus Walker, an eminent lawyer of his time, later being associated in the same capacity with General James Shields, a soldier of the Mexican War, who also served as United States Senator at different periods from Illinois, Minnesota and Missouri. Always a political and personal friend of Abraham Lincoln after coming to Illinois, Mr. Conkling served one term as mayor of the city of Springfield (1844-45), and two terms as Representative in the General Assembly from Sangamon county (1851-52 and 1867-68); was a member of the Committee on Resolutions in the Republican State convention at Bloomington in 1856, and by the same convention was appointed a member of the State Central Committee; also, in 1860 and again in 1864, was chosen Presidential Elector for the Springfield District, on both occasions casting his vote in the Electoral College for Abraham Lincoln for President. Besides holding various appointive offices during the war period, for the last thirty years of his life he served as a member of the Lincoln Monument Association and as Postmaster of the city of Springfield from 1890 to 1894. His death occurred March 1, 1899.

LINCOLN'S FAMOUS LETTER.

FULL TEXT OF THE DOCUMENT WRITTEN TO JAMES C. CONKLING IN 1863.

EXECUTIVE MANSION,

WASHINGTON, D. C., August 26, 1863.

Hon. James C. Conkling:

DEAR SIR—Your letter inviting me to attend a mass-meeting of unconditional Union men, to be held at the capital of Illinois on the 3d day of September, has been received. It would be very agreeable for me thus to meet my old friends at my own home, but I cannot just now be absent from here so long as a visit there would require.

The meeting is to be of all those who maintain unconditional devotion to the Union, and I am sure that my old political friends will thank me for tendering, as I do, the Nation's gratitude to those noble men whom no partisan malice or partisan hope can make false to the Nation's life.

There are those who are dissatisfied with me. To such I would say: You desire peace and you blame me that we do not have it. But how can we attain it? There are but three conceivable ways: First—to suppress the rebellion by force of arms. This I am trying to do. Are you for it? If you are, so far we are agreed. If you are not for it, a second way is to give up the Union. I am against this. Are you for it? If you are, you should say so plainly. If you are not for force, nor yet for dissolution, there only remains some imaginable compromise.

I do not believe that any compromise embracing the maintenance of the Union is now possible. All that I learn leads to a directly opposite belief. The strength of the rebellion is its military, its army. That army dominates all the country and all the people within its range. Any offer of terms made by any man or men within that range in opposition to that army is simply nothing for the present, because such man or men have no power whatever to enforce their side of a compromise if one were made with them.

To illustrate: Suppose refugees from the South and peace men of the North get together in convention and frame and proclaim a compromise embracing a restoration of the Union. In what way can that compromise be used to keep Lee's army out of Pennsylvania? Meade's army can keep Lee's army out of Pennsylvania and, I think, can ultimately drive it out of existence. But no paper compromise to which the controllers of Lee's army are not agreed can at all affect that army. In an effort at such compromise we would waste time, which the enemy would improve to our disadvantage, and that would be all.

A compromise to be effective must be made either with the rebel army or with the people first liberated from the domination of that army by the success of our own army. Now allow me to assure you that no word or intimation from the rebel army, or from any of the men controlling it, in relation to any peace compromise has ever come to my knowledge or belief. All charges and insinuations to the contrary are deceptive and groundless. And I promise you that, if any such proposition shall hereafter come, it shall not be rejected and kept a secret from you. I freely acknowledge myself to be the servant of the people according to the bond of service, the United States Constitution, and that, as such, I am responsible to them.

But to be plain. You are dissatisfied with me about the negro. Quite likely there is a difference of opinion between you and myself upon that subject. I certainly wish that all men could be free, while you, I suppose, do not. Yet I have neither adopted nor proposed any measure which is not consistent even with your view, provided that you are for the Union. I suggested compensated emancipation, to which you replied you wished not to be taxed to buy negroes. But I had not asked you to be taxed to buy negroes, except in such a way as to save you from greater taxation to save the Union exclusively by other means.

You dislike the emancipation proclamation, and perhaps would have it retracted. You say it is unconstitutional. I think differently. I think the Constitution invests its Commander-in-Chief with the law of war in time of war. The most that can be said, if so much, is, that slaves are property. Is there, has there ever been, any question that, by the law of war, property, both of enemies and friends, may be taken when needed? And is it not needed whenever it helps us and hurts the enemy? Armies the world over destroy enemies' property when they cannot use it, and even destroy their own to keep it from the enemy. Civilized belligerents do all in their power to help themselves or hurt the enemy, except a few things regarded as barbarous or cruel. Among the exceptions are the massacre of vanquished foes and non-combatants, male and female.

But the proclamation, as a law, either is valid or is not valid. If it is not valid it needs no retraction. If it is valid it cannot be retracted any more than the dead can be brought to life. Some of you profess to think its retraction would operate unfavorably for the Union. Why better after the retraction than before the issue? There was more than a year and a half of trial to suppress the rebellion before the proclamation was issued, the last 100 days of which passed under an explicit notice that it was coming unless averted by those in revolt returning to their allegiance. The war has certainly progressed as favorably for us since the issue of the proclamation as before.

I know, as fully as one can know the opinion of others, that some of the commanders of our armies in the field, who have given us our most important victories, believe the emancipation policy and the use of colored troops constitute the heaviest blows yet dealt to the rebellion, and that at least one of those important successes could not have been achieved when it was but for the aid of the black soldiers.

Among the commanders who hold these views are some who have never had an affinity with what is called "abolitionism" or with "Republican party politics," but who hold them purely as military opinions. I submit their opinions as entitled to some weight against the objections, often urged, that emancipation and arming the blacks are unwise as military measures and were not adopted as such in good faith.

You say that you will not fight to free negroes. Some of them seem willing to fight for you; but no matter. Fight you, then, exclusively to save the Union. I issued the proclamation on purpose to aid you in saving the Union. Whenever you shall have conquered all resistance to the Union if I shall urge you to continue fighting, it will be an apt time then for you to declare you will not fight to free negroes. I thought that in your struggle for the Union, to whatever extent the negroes shall cease helping the enemy, to that extent it weakened the enemy in his resistance to you. Do you think differently? I thought whatever negroes can be got to do as soldiers leaves just so much less for white soldiers to do in saving the Union. Does it appear otherwise to you? But negroes, like other people, act upon motives. Why should they do anything for us if we will do nothing for them? If they stake their lives for us, they must be prompted by the strongest motives, even the promise of freedom. And the promise, being made, must be kept.

The signs look better. The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea. Thanks to the great Northwest for it; nor yet wholly to them. Three hundred miles up they met New England, Empire, Keystone and Jersey, hewing their way right and left. The sunny South, too, in more colors than one, also lent a helping hand. On the spot, their part of the history was jotted down in black and white. The job was a great national one, and let none be slighted who bore an honorable part in it. And while those who have cleared the great river may well be proud, even that is not all. It is hard to say that anything has been more bravely and well done than at Antietam, Murfreesboro, Gettysburg, and on many fields of less note. Nor must Uncle Sam's web feet be forgotten. At all the watery margins they have been present, not only on the deep sea, the broad bay, and the rapid river, but also up the narrow, muddy bayou, and wherever the ground was a little

damp they have been and made their tracks. Thanks to all. For the great republic—for the principle it lives by and keeps alive—for man's vast future—thanks to all.

Peace does not appear so distant as it did. I hope it will come soon and come to stay, and so come as to be worth the keeping in all future time. It will then have been proved that among freemen there can be no successful appeal from the ballot to the bullet, and that they who take such appeal are sure to lose their case and pay the costs. And there will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clinched teeth, and steady eye, and well poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation, while I fear there will be some white ones unable to forget that, with malignant heart and deceitful speech, they have striven to hinder it.

Still let us not be oversanguine of a speedy, final triumph. Let us be quite sober. Let us diligently apply the means, never doubting that a just God, in his own good time, will give us the rightful result.

Yours very truly,

A. LINCOLN.

